

*Bismarck's
urban bowhunt
entered its 22nd
season this fall.*



Urban Archery

By Ron Wilson

Bismarck's long-running urban archery season continues to catch the eye of communities elsewhere looking to manage municipal deer herds.

From Montana to Oklahoma, to South Dakota and Utah, city leaders have inquired about a widely-admired bowhunt designed to reduce deer numbers, but not remove them entirely from the city landscape.

"Bismarck's urban archery season is a model program, and its success is directly related to the support from the city, police department, city commission and the public," said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "The city deserves all the credit for running it. The Game and Fish Department's involvement is very little, frankly, as we simply provide the opportunity to hunt through the governor's proclamation."

Stephen Schneider, Bismarck Police Department animal control warden, has been involved with the city bowhunt from the beginning. "When we started this thing in 1987, I guess we didn't know what we'd get as we mixed bowhunters with joggers, walkers, bicyclists, homeowners ... " he said.

What they got is a manageable deer herd thanks to a segment of the hunting community that strives to be unapparent. "The bowhunters know that the least amount of attention they attract to themselves the better," Schneider said. "When I meet with them, I tell them 'Out of sight, out of mind ...'"

Since 1987, bowhunters have harvested 855 deer from land in south Bismarck open to archers. In 2007-08, 26 deer were taken during the program's 21st season. "Policing the hunt has never been a problem," said Schneider, who noted that complaints about hunters have been virtually nonexistent in more than two decades. "When the season is going, we're keeping an eye on things. Sometimes I put on my camouflage and take a walk through the woods."

Kreil agrees with how smoothly the season has run

for years. "A lot of credit goes directly to the Bismarck Police Department for their thought in implementing the program," he said. "The people who participate in the program also do a great job of conducting themselves."

The hunt got started years ago because animals were spilling into homeowners' gardens and in front of traffic. "It was frustrating to homeowners planting expensive shrubs only to find them eaten the next morning," Schneider said. "Today, the numbers of complaints about deer in yards are virtually nothing, and the number of deer-vehicles collisions have drastically decreased."

Part of the reason that deer become a nuisance in some urban settings is because humans are encroaching on what was traditionally deer habitat. "Also, people who are kindhearted and don't understand the implications of their actions are feeding the deer," Kreil said, noting that some cities like Grand Forks and Fargo have banned deer feeding. "This sets the stage for deer being less fearful of humans, which increases conflicts between the two."

While some of the bowhunting in Bismarck takes place on private land, the majority is on city-owned land, which is another reason the program is successful, Kreil said. "The city has property where people can hunt and harvest deer, and that's important," he said. "We tried to work with Valley City to implement a similar program, but there is basically no city or publicly owned property that provides viable hunting opportunities."

Much of the land where Bismarck archers hunt is near the city's water treatment plant and close to Riverwood Golf Course. Before the hunt started 20-plus years ago, Schneider said he watched more than 250 deer run by as people without firearms tried to push the animals out of the woods near the water treatment plant.

"It was during the state's deer gun season in November and those deer wouldn't leave because they knew they were safe," Schneider said.

Patrick Isakson goes through the steps of putting up a tree stand for demonstration purposes in Bismarck's urban bowhunting zone.

That's changed with the archery program, which Schneider describes as fair chase hunting. "This is a hunt ... this is not a canned hunt," he said. "They are wild animals that come and go as they please."

The city of Fargo is in its third year of an urban archery program that takes place mostly on public land along the Red River. While only 31 deer were harvested the first two years, the number of deer complaints in the urban environment have gone down.

"I live near one of the parks where bowhunting is allowed and I've seen a lot less sign of the animals when I'm out walking around," said Clay Whittlesey, Fargo Park District director of recreation. "I know there is nothing scientific about my findings, but you do get a pretty good feel for what's going on when you live in the area."

Unlike Bismarck's hunt, Fargo archers need to pass a training program before they are able to hunt. "The emphasis is on quality, ethical hunters," Whittlesey said. "If they don't pass, they don't hunt."

Schneider said many of the participants in the Bismarck hunt are familiar faces as they have been hunting deer within the city limits for years. "We're also getting some parents bringing their kids out and introducing them to hunting," he said. "It's close and convenient and they can be out sitting in their tree stands or ground blinds shortly after getting out of school."

When it comes to deer, elk and other similar species, hunting is the only way to efficiently and economically manage populations, Kreil said. "Archery hunting, especially in these controlled settings, is very safe and can be very effective," he said. "Bowhunters, due to the nature of the activity and the strategies hunters employ, can go unnoticed by passersby. Once the public gets over the initial concern of having a hunt, you can have an urban archery program with little disturbance."

Left alone, deer herds can grow quickly, which is a concern of city officials having to deal with growing complaints from the community. "Prior to the Fargo hunt we did an aerial survey along the Red River in the city limits and counted nearly 200 deer," Kreil said. "Left unchecked, that population could grow to 900-1,000 animals in five years."

Knowing this, Whittlesey said the longevity of the program is important. "We're in it for the long haul," he said. "If we stop for a year or two, the problems will only escalate."

North Dakota is not unique in that its urban environments are populated with growing deer herds. "But what sets us apart is that most of the public understands the need to control the population and that hunting is a viable option," Kreil said. "In other parts of the country, city officials proposing such programs don't get the same kind of understanding from much of the public. It's an uphill battle in many instances as people don't see it as we do in North Dakota."

In the beginning, Bismarck archers were harvesting only a handful of deer. "Initially a hunter could come in and hunt a two-week period and then it was someone else's turn," Schneider said. "The problem was that bowhunters weren't getting enough time in the woods to pattern the deer."



RON WILSON



Turkeys in Town

An experimental bowhunting season for wild turkeys will be held this fall within Bismarck's city limits to help control a growing population of birds in residential areas.

A maximum of 25 licenses will be distributed to hunters who are licensed to bowhunt deer within the city.

"The numbers of turkeys in south Bismarck have grown over the years and so have the complaints," said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "We believe a bowhunt for turkeys will be very successful."

The two-week time period was eventually abandoned and hunters were then able to come and go as they pleased. Participants started to figure out the comings and goings of the deer and the number harvested per season jumped manifold.

Today, the Bismarck city hunt runs concurrent with the state's archery season. The exception is that the urban archers can continue their season through the end of January, but shoot antlerless deer only.

Schneider said a North Dakota archery license allows the hunter to shoot either a buck or doe in the city bowhunting zone. And once the archer gets a city permit, he or she can purchase up to three additional doe licenses, which can be used on city property or within the county multiple tag area. The city allows a limit of 50 bowhunters for the urban season.

At the end of the season, participants in the urban hunt are required to return a mandatory questionnaire, which details how many deer they saw, shot and so on. "The questionnaire is a management tool and if someone doesn't return it, they won't be hunting next year," Schneider said.

There are still a number of deer in south Bismarck, Kreil said, but the urban archery season has kept deer from growing beyond manageable means. "When cities implement an archery hunt as a population control measure, they must remember that they are in it for the duration," he said. "This is not a short-term solution for a long-term problem. The city of Bismarck's long-running program is a perfect example of how something like this can work."

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